

NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Nebraska and the Civil War



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About the Author

James E. Potter is Senior Research Historian at the Nebraska State Historical Society, and author of *Standing Firmly by the Flag: Nebraska Territory and the Civil War, 1861-1867* (University of Nebraska Press). Please refer to this book if you want to learn more about Nebraska and the Civil War after reading this iBook.

CHAPTER 1

The Law That Tore the Country Apart



Detail of an 1854 map showing the new territories of Nebraska and Kansas.
Nebraska State Historical Society.

When the Civil War broke out in April 1861, Nebraska had been an organized U.S. Territory for nearly seven years. On March 1, 1867, not quite two years after the war ended with Union victory in 1865, Nebraska became the thirty-seventh state. Accordingly, the Civil War had much to do with shaping Nebraska's history, both during the four-year conflict itself and for decades to come.

The May 30, 1854, act of Congress that created Nebraska Territory and neighboring Kansas Territory helped bring on the Civil War. Far from simply defining the territories' boundaries and establishing a governmental infrastructure that would lead to eventual statehood, the **Kansas-Nebraska Act** revived bitter sectional disagreements about the place of slavery in the United States. That controversy had been smoldering for decades, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act helped fan its embers into flames of war.

By the early nineteenth century slavery had been abolished in the states of the North and the trans-Atlantic slave trade had been prohibited. Yet slavery remained strongly entrenched in the South, where it was the foundation of the region's social order and economy. As anti-slavery **sentiment** grew stronger in the North, the South became increasingly defensive about protecting slavery from legislative efforts to restrict its spread or even abolish it. Such threats could only be forestalled as long as the South maintained a balance of power with the North in the U.S. Congress.

The addition of new lands to the United States constantly threatened to upset this delicate balance, which had been preserved through political compromises beginning in 1820. These compromises generally banned slavery in certain regions being organized as territories or states, while permitting it in others. The

goal was to maintain relatively equal congressional representation from both slave-holding and free-soil constituencies. For example, **the Missouri Compromise of 1820** brought Missouri into the Union as a slave state and Maine as a free state. It also banned slavery "forever" in the remaining lands originally acquired through the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, which included the future Nebraska and Kansas territories. This was a region many observers believed was destined to be a permanent Indian homeland never to be occupied by Anglo-Americans.



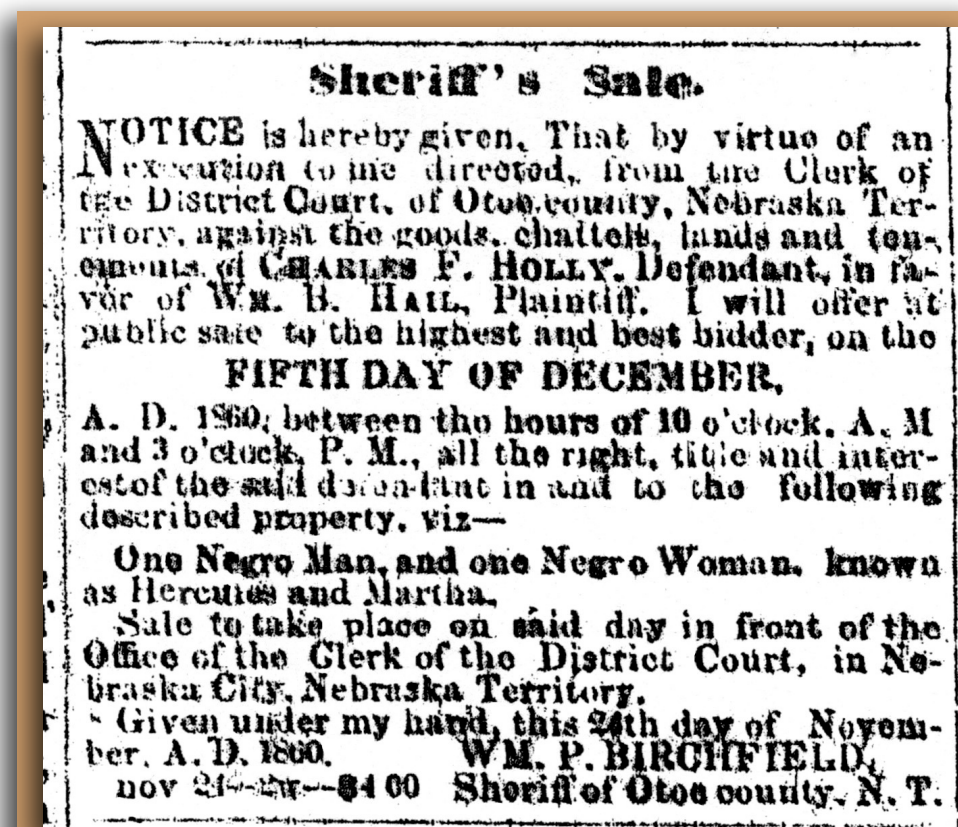
What is now the central United States looked very different in 1854 at the time of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. NSHS 912/xJ63

When additional lands were annexed to the United States after victory over Mexico in the war of 1846-48, however, it became clear that settlement of the interior West by Americans could not long be delayed. At the same time interest was growing in the eventual construction of a transcontinental railroad to the West Coast. In order for these goals to be realized, new compromises were needed to maintain the political status quo with regard to slavery. The Compromise of 1850 admitted California as a free state and organized Utah and New Mexico as territories, leaving undecided the status of slavery therein until such time as the residents drafted constitutions and applied for statehood.

When it came time to organize Nebraska and Kansas territories, it was expected that the Missouri Compromise's ban on slavery would apply. The South, however, saw the organization of two new territories where slavery would be banned as a dangerous precedent. If opportunities to create new slave states in the American West were forever foreclosed and only free-soil states were subsequently admitted to the Union, the congressional balance of power would be destroyed. The South would become a political minority, a weakness through which the abolition of slavery nationwide might be imposed. Southern members of Congress refused to support the Kansas-Nebraska Act unless its sponsors, principally Illinois U.S. Senator Stephen A. Douglas, agreed to repeal the 1820 Missouri Compromise.

Instead of the outright ban on slavery that the Missouri Compromise had provided, the Kansas-Nebraska Act substituted "**popular sovereignty**," the same provision earlier applied to Utah and New Mexico territories under the Compromise of 1850. In

other words, the people who settled in the territories could decide for themselves whether or not to allow slavery.



This ad for a slave sale appeared in the Nebraska City News on November 24, 1860.

This provision sparked bloodshed in Kansas during the 1850s as "free soil" and "pro-slavery" factions battled for political control with the fate of slavery hanging in the balance. By comparison Nebraska saw none of the strife that gave her sister territory the nickname of "Bleeding Kansas." There was never much chance that slavery would become established in Nebraska, and only a few slaveholders settled here. The 1860 U.S. Census listed only fifteen slaves in the entire territory. In 1861 the Nebraska territorial legislature used popular sovereignty to pass a law prohibiting slavery altogether.



African Americans loading wagons in Brownville about 1864: the earliest known photograph of black Nebraskans. These men were not slaves, because in 1861 the territorial legislature banned slavery in Nebraska. NSHS RG3190-283

A more important consequence of the Kansas-Nebraska Act was its effect on national politics. By keeping open the prospect that slavery might spread into the West, the act reenergized the Northern anti-slavery movement and led to formation of the Republican Party. The Republicans were dedicated to halting slavery's spread, hoping that by confining it to the South it would eventually die out. By allowing slavery where it had previously been banned, the Kansas-Nebraska act also split the Democratic Party into northern and southern wings. The split enabled the 1860 election of Republican Abraham Lincoln as president by an electoral minority based almost exclusively in the North. The election's outcome convinced the South that the administration, now dominated by Northern Republicans, might soon move to

abolish slavery. Even before Lincoln could be inaugurated, eleven Southern states **seceded** from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America.

The Underground Railroad and Nebraska Territory

In the years before the Civil War began in 1861, residents of Northern states and territories sometimes helped African American slaves escape from bondage in the South. This aid included providing slaves with food and shelter as they sought to make their way to Northern cities or even into Canada. Because it was against the law to help slaves escape, those who did so tried to avoid attracting attention. For this reason, groups, individuals, and sites connected with these secretive activities were said to be part of "the Underground Railroad."

Part of Nebraska Territory bordered the slave state of Missouri. The noted John Brown, who fought slavery in Kansas in the 1850s and was later executed for trying to start a slave uprising with his 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry, Virginia, traveled through Nebraska several times. On his last trip out of Kansas through Nebraska, Brown brought eleven slaves whom he had liberated in Missouri. Both the Brownville and Nebraska City newspapers mentioned this trip and the slaves with Brown.

U. G. R. R.

Brown, of southern Kansas, passed through Nemaha City, in this county, about midnight, on Saturday night last, with thirteen negroes and sixty horses.

CHAPTER 2


Nebraska's Soldiers in Union Blue



Officers of the Second Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry in 1863. (Front row, left to right): Col. Robert W. Furnas, Lt. Col. W. F. Sapp, Surg. A. Bowen, Maj. George Armstrong. NSHS RG4389-19

The Civil War began on April 12, 1861, when South Carolina forces shelled the federal government's Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor and forced its surrender. President Lincoln called for volunteers for a Union army to put down the rebellion, and Nebraskans responded by furnishing more than 3,000 men during the war. This was a remarkable contribution for a young territory whose 1860 population was slightly more than 28,000. From 1861 until the war ended with Union victory in 1865 and for another year longer, Nebraska soldiers remained in their country's service.

V O L U N T E E R !



THERE will be a meeting of the citizens of Nemaha county, at Brownville, on Saturday afternoon next, for the purpose of forming a Military Company. whose services are to be tendered the Governor of Nebraska for the three year volunteer service. Let all, from every portion of the county, who desire to volunteer in defence of their country be present, and join the company.

MANY UNION MEN.

Advertisement for the organization of a volunteer military company at Brownville, Nebraska Territory. Nebraska Advertiser, May 23, 1861.

Almost all of Nebraska's Civil War soldiers had come from somewhere else, because it had been illegal for white Americans to settle in Nebraska before 1854. Although most of the men were born in the United States, the ranks included emigrants from

Germany, Mexico, France, Russia, England, Ireland, Sweden, Poland, and Bohemia. A few were of mixed blood, the offspring of white men and Indian women. Two companies of Nebraska Indian scouts served alongside U.S. soldiers against the Sioux, Cheyennes, and Arapahos in 1865. The Pawnee Scouts were led by Capt. Frank North, and the Omaha Scouts (mostly Winnebagos) were commanded by Capt. Edwin Nash.

In addition to the volunteers who served in officially designated Nebraska units, many Nebraskans enlisted in Union regiments raised in Iowa, Kansas, or Missouri. Likewise, men from other states joined Nebraska regiments, such as two companies of men from Page County, Iowa, and several Germans from St. Joseph, Missouri. A few men from the South who had settled in Nebraska before the war left the territory and enlisted in the Confederate army.

Soon after the war broke out, the federal government recalled the **regular U.S. Army soldiers** stationed at Forts Laramie, Kearny, and Randall in Nebraska Territory and sent them east. Their departure left Nebraskans fearful that Indians might attack the settlements or travelers along the Platte Valley overland route. "We think the government did a great wrong and injustice in removing the troops," wrote the editor of the *Nebraska City News* on April 30, 1861. "The only way to repair the injustice is to order the forts garrisoned by our citizen soldiers." John M. Thayer, commander of the **Nebraska Militia**, made such a proposal to U.S. Secretary of War Simon Cameron on April 17, 1861, offering Nebraska volunteers to garrison Forts Kearny and Randall saying, "I deem it absolutely necessary that some measures should be taken to keep the Indians in check."



Augustus ("Ajax") Harvey, the outspoken editor of the Nebraska City News from 1861 to 1865, photographed about 1867.
NSHS RG2411-2215b

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The government soon asked Nebraska Territory to furnish one regiment of volunteers for the Union army. Secretary of War Cameron assured the governor that the Nebraska soldiers would not be sent elsewhere, "but assigned for the protection of your own people and interests against hostile Indians and foes." But soon after the regiment was **mustered-in** at Omaha in the summer of 1861, it was ordered to Missouri. Nebraska Territory was left virtually unprotected.

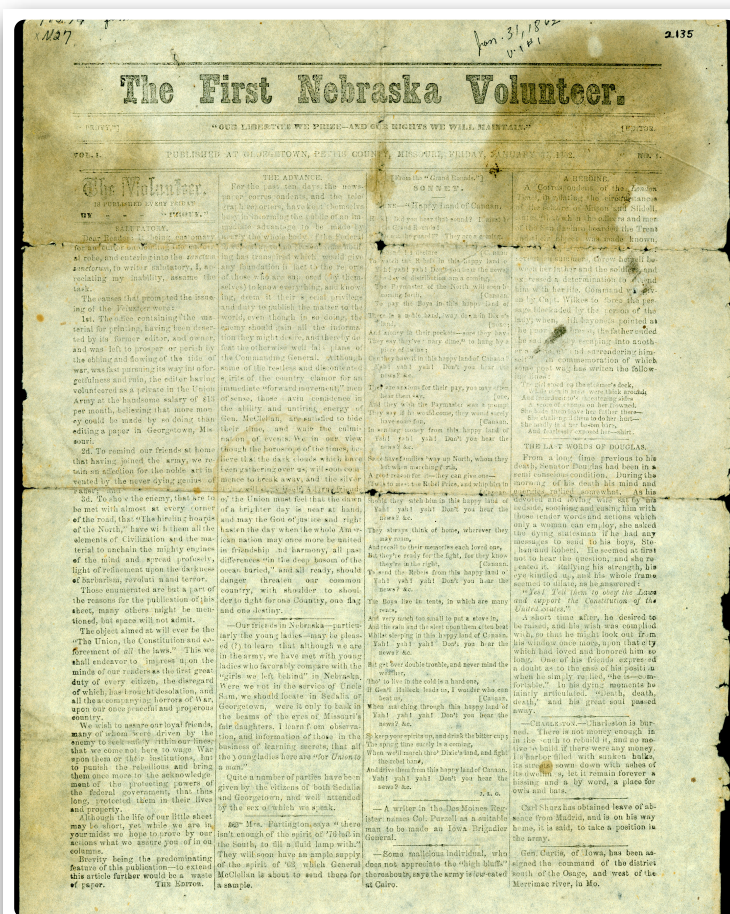
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The new regiment, a thousand officers and men strong, was designated as the **First Nebraska Volunteer Infantry** with John M. Thayer as its colonel. Half of the regiment left Omaha on July 20, 1861, on board the steamboat *West Wind* and the rest soon followed. By late August the First Nebraska was stationed at Pilot Knob, Missouri, a Union base southwest of St. Louis. In the winter of 1861-62 the Nebraska

soldiers camped at Georgetown, Missouri. Their first months of service were marked only by a few brief **skirmishes** with Confederate or **guerrilla forces**. Most of the First Nebraska's casualties came from disease or accidents.

In early February 1862 the Nebraska regiment was sent to join Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's campaign to take Confederate Forts

Henry and Donelson in northwestern Tennessee. Although Fort Henry on the Tennessee River fell to Union gunboats before the army arrived, Grant was forced to lay siege to Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River. The First Nebraska reached Fort Donelson on February 14 and the next day helped **repulse** a desperate Confederate charge to break through the Union lines. This defeat forced the Confederates to surrender on February 16, 1862, the first major Union victory of the war.

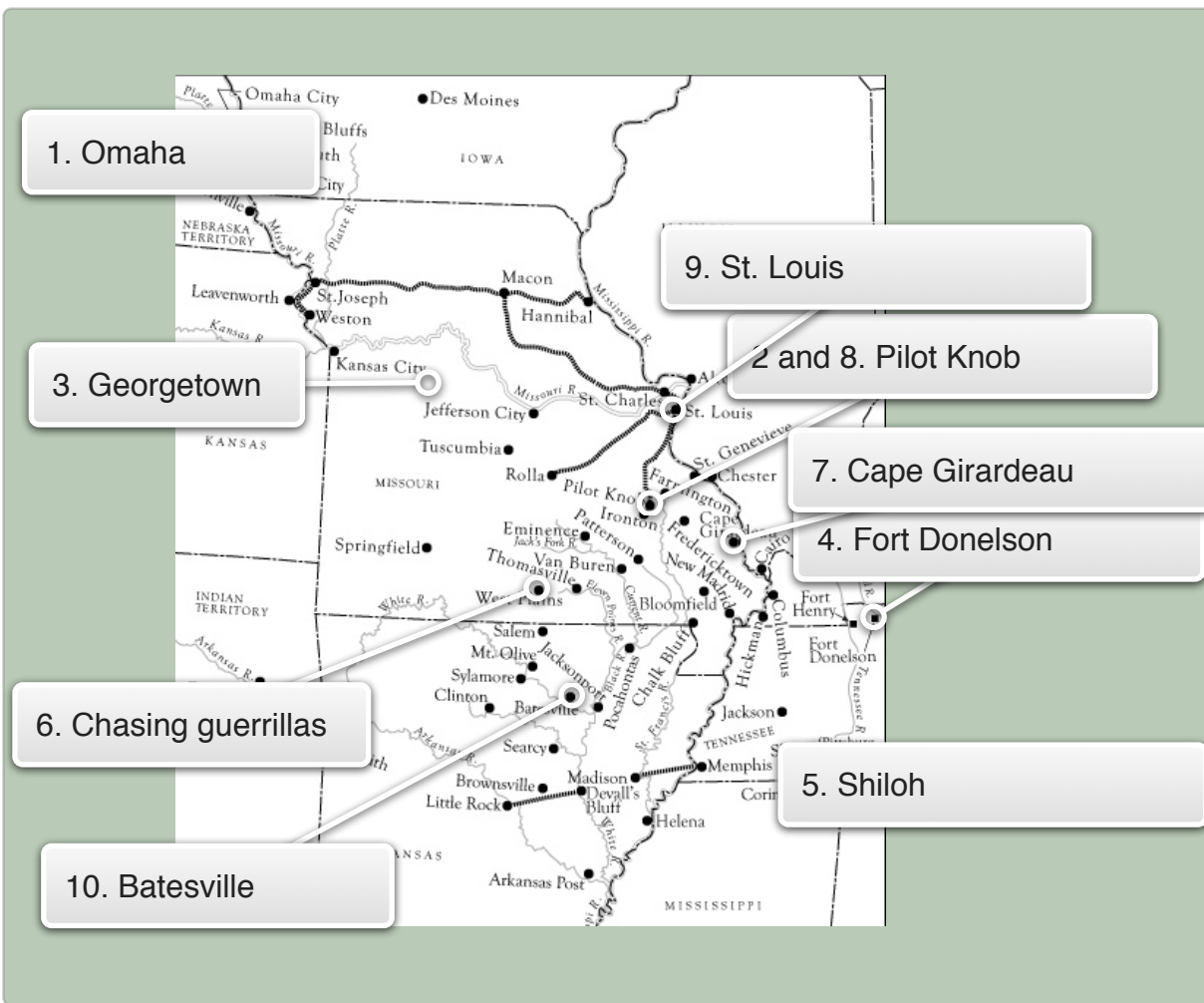


While the First Nebraska soldiers camped at Georgetown, they had time to print a newspaper. It discussed politics, the war, and events around Georgetown.
NSHS SFN37924.

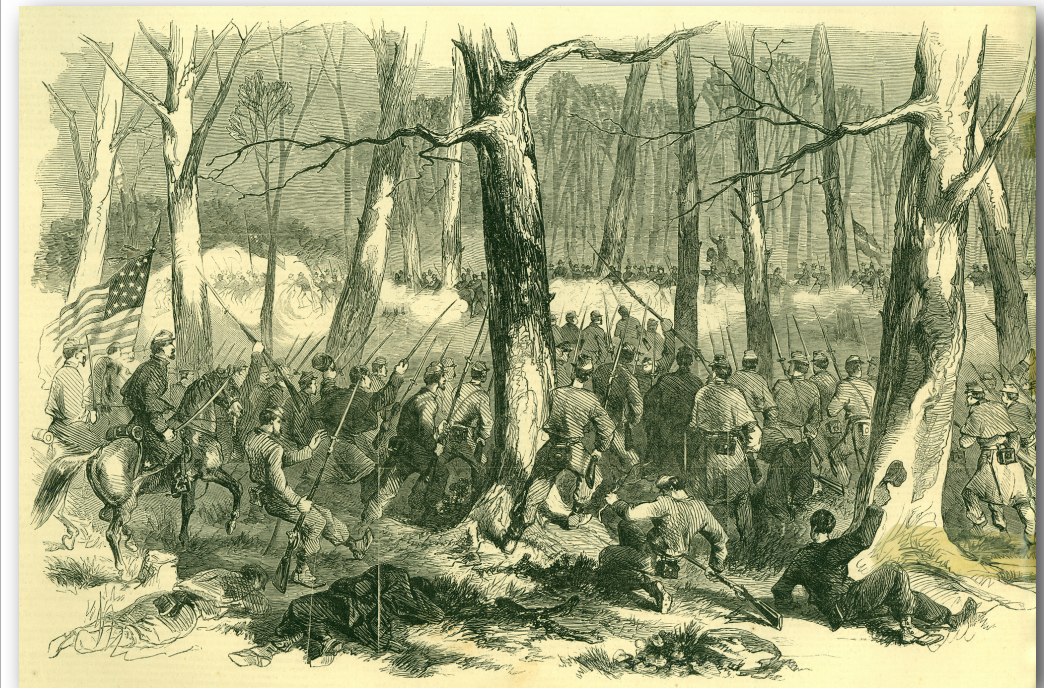
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In April 1862 followed a bloody battle between Grant's army and Confederate forces at Shiloh or Pittsburg Landing in southwestern Tennessee, the largest battle yet fought in North America. The First Nebraska reached the battlefield in time for the second day's fighting on April 7, 1862, and helped drive the Confederates from the field in this narrow Union victory, losing several men killed and wounded. The official reports of Colonel Thayer and division commander Gen. Lew Wallace highly praised the courage and discipline of the Nebraska soldiers and their officers both at Fort Donelson and Shiloh, the largest and most important battles in which the regiment would fight during its Civil War service.

The Travels of the First Nebraska Volunteer Infantry



Counterattack of Gen. Lew Wallace's division at the Battle of Fort Donelson, Tennessee, February 15, 1862



This artist's interpretation appeared in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, March 15, 1862.

The Battle of Shiloh



Thorpe de Thulstrup, 1888. Library of Congress.

The First Nebraska Volunteer Infantry performed mostly garrison duty during the summer and fall of 1862. From December 1862 through February 1863 the regiment marched hundreds of miles through mud and snow in the Ozarks of southern Missouri and northern Arkansas with Gen. John Davidson's Army of Southeastern Missouri. Davidson and his troops sought to subdue enemy guerrillas roaming the countryside and perhaps join with other Union forces to attack the Arkansas capital of Little Rock. The exhausting campaign accomplished little, however, except to wear out the soldiers and ruin their equipment.

The Equipment of War



A Colt .44 caliber, percussion, single-action revolver was a common sidearm carried by cavalymen. Pvt. Jacob Coffman of the Second Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry was photographed holding a Colt revolver (see page 14). NSHS Museum Collections 3231.

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This homemade uniform jacket belonged to First Nebraska soldier John W. Barr of Plattsmouth. This coat was replaced by a government-issue coat when the regiment was organized. NSHS Museum Collections 19851.



Typical Union enlisted man's sack coat issued by the government during the Civil War. NSHS Museum Collections 2754.

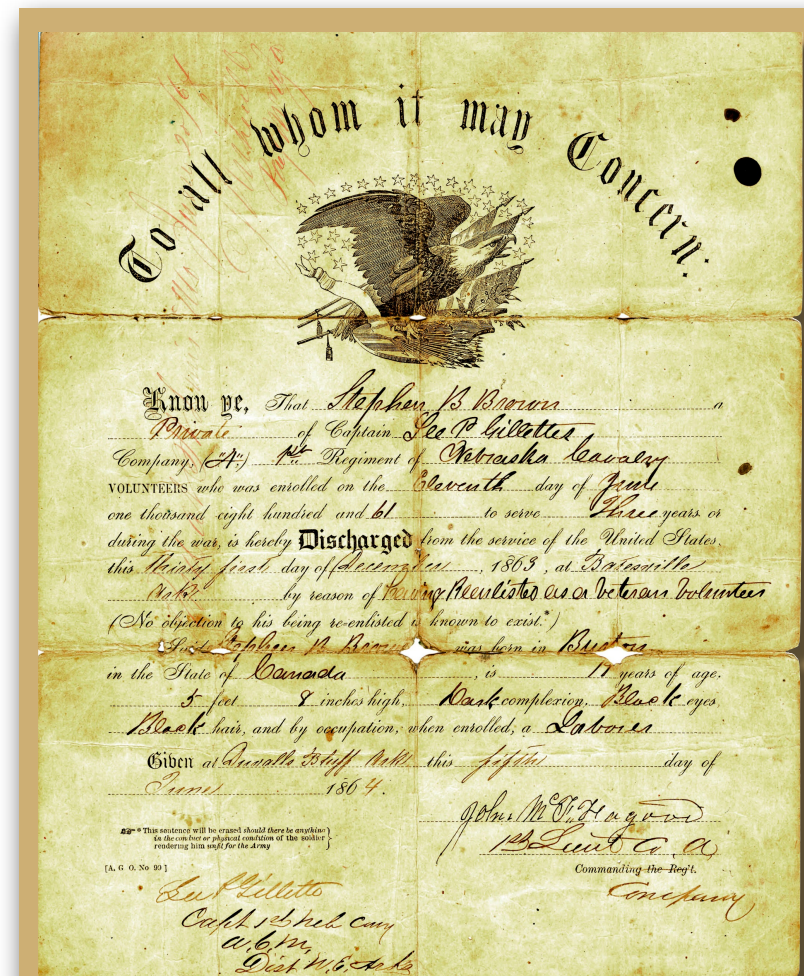
In March 1863 the First Nebraska was sent to garrison Cape Girardeau, Missouri, an important Union base on the Mississippi River south of St. Louis. One company was soon detached to St. Louis as military police, and these soldiers experienced the hustle and bustle of Missouri's largest city and a major Union headquarters. While these men were gone, the rest of the First Nebraska fought a spirited engagement at Cape Girardeau with Confederate cavalry raiders on April 26, and then helped pursue the fleeing rebels back to Arkansas.

In the summer of 1863 the First Nebraska returned to Pilot Knob, where the soldiers helped build an earthwork named Fort Davidson. In late August the entire regiment moved to St. Louis, where its companies guarded military prisons, warehouses, steamboat wharves, and the navy yard where Union ironclad gunboats were being built. During this St. Louis sojourn, orders came in October to make the First Nebraska into a cavalry regiment, probably a welcome change for men who had tramped all over Missouri and part of Arkansas. By mid-December the cavalry organization was complete, and the First Nebraska moved south to Batesville, Arkansas, on the White River. The regiment's Colonel Robert R. Livingston took command of the District of Northeastern Arkansas.

The new horse soldiers found a fast paced and exhausting kind of warfare in Arkansas. Few organized Confederate units remained, and the enemy was mostly irregular or guerrilla bands who lurked in the woods, killing and plundering soldiers and civilians alike. Colonel Livingston and his men had been ordered to kill or capture these guerrillas, protect loyal citizens, and restore order to the region. It turned out to be a difficult task. The country was wooded and mountainous, supplies were scarce for both men and horses, and the enemy struck without warning. After weeks of being in the saddle at all hours of the day and night, engaging in several sharp skirmishes with the guerrillas and killing or capturing many, a lack of supplies forced the First Nebraska Cavalry to leave Batesville. By June 1864 the regiment had relocated to DeVall's Bluff, a Union depot farther south on the White River, where a railroad led off to Little Rock.

Orders arrived at DeVall's Bluff that sent the First Nebraska veterans home on a furlough after nearly three years in the army. Those soldiers who agreed to reenlist for another three years were promised extra pay (called a "bounty"), a furlough, and earned the

right to be called Veteran Volunteers. These bonuses applied to many men in the First Nebraska who left Arkansas on June 10, 1864, for their well-deserved furlough. Little did they know that they would never return to the South and would spend the rest of their time in the army fighting Indians in Nebraska Territory and other locales in the West. After the veterans left Arkansas, the First Nebraska soldiers

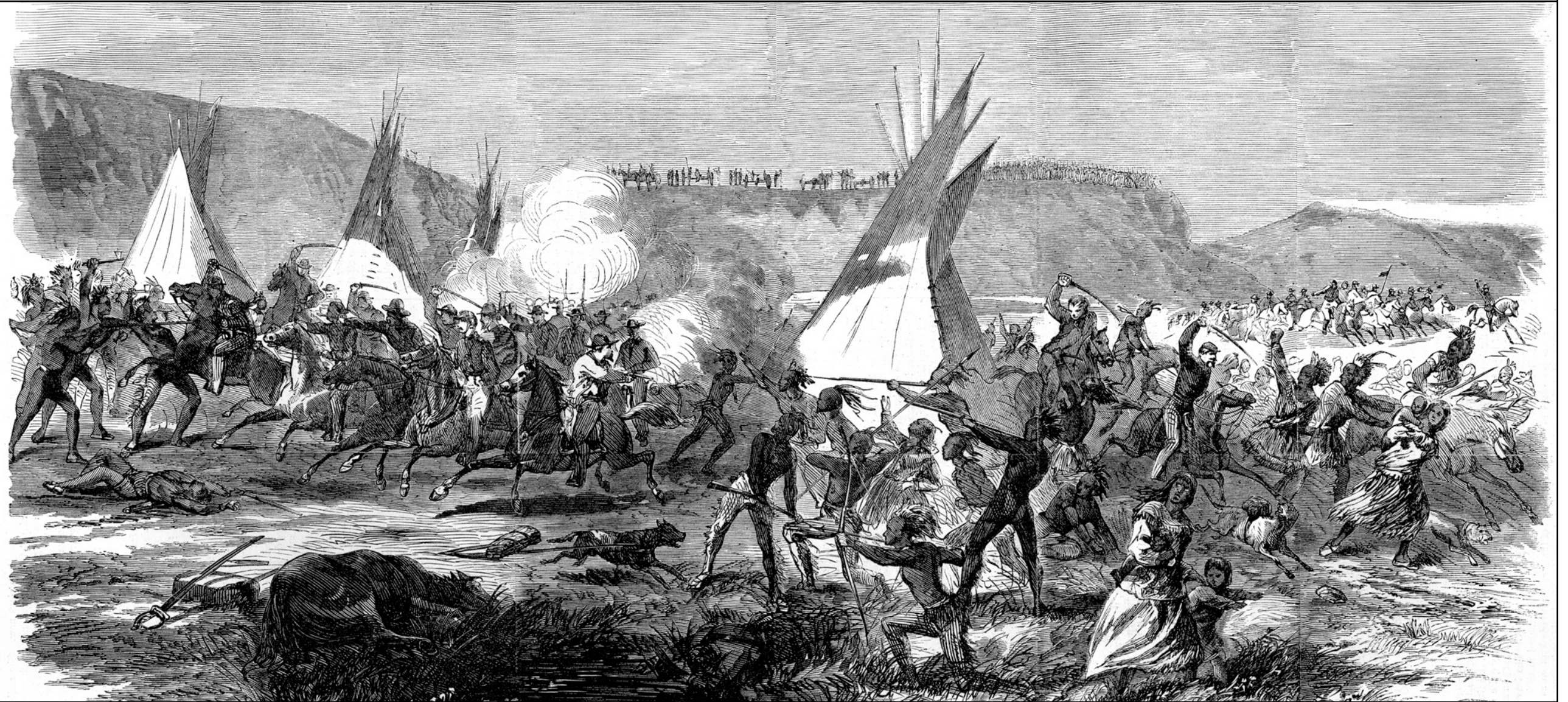


Pvt. Stephen Brown of the First Nebraska Cavalry was discharged in order to reenlist as a Veteran Volunteer. NSHS Museum Collections 8611-2.

who had not reenlisted stayed behind until their terms expired, and several were killed or captured on August 30, 1864, in a fight with Confederate cavalry at a place called Grand Prairie.

CHAPTER 3

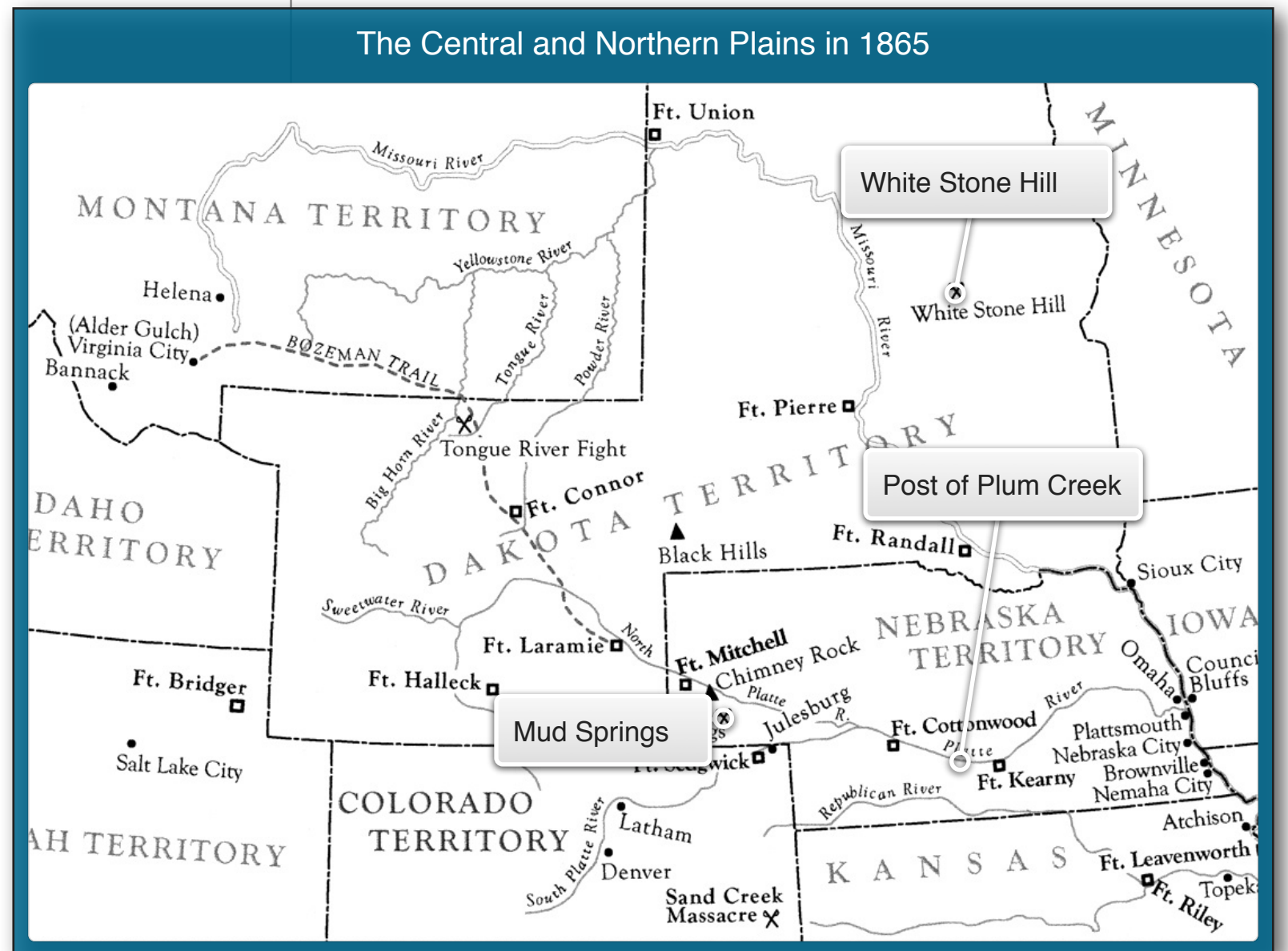
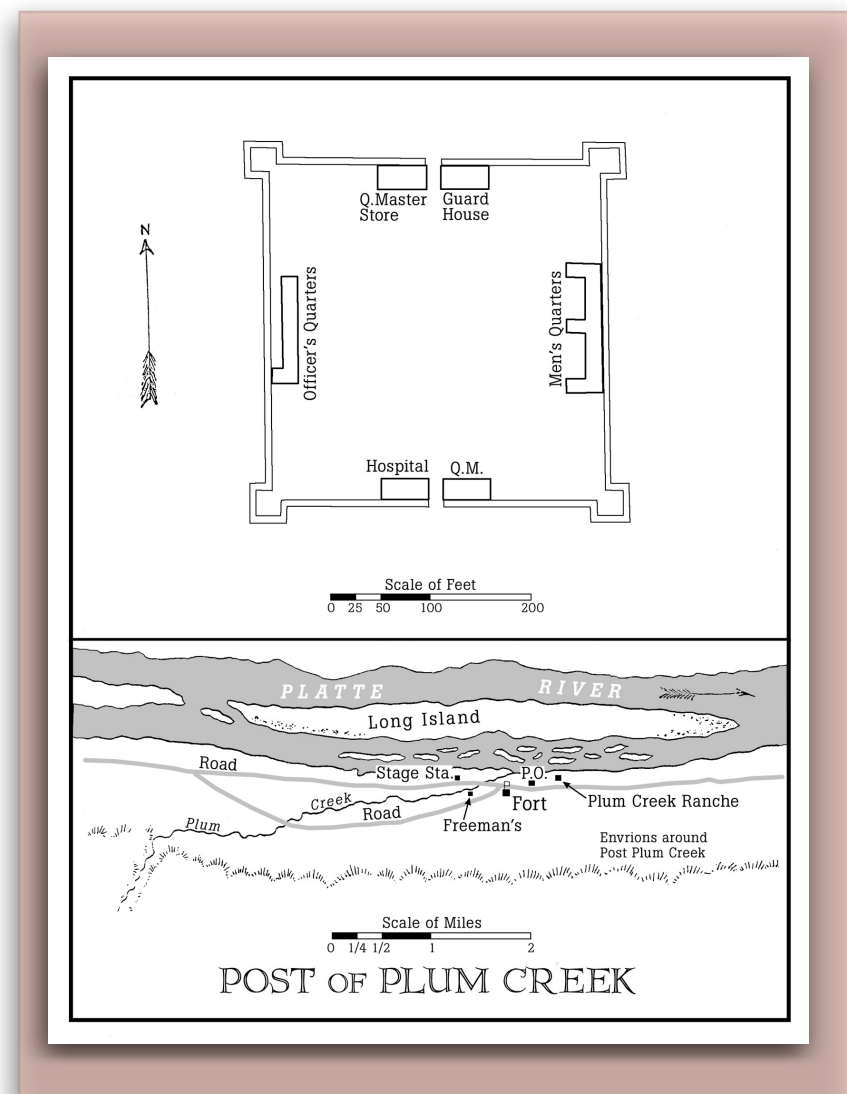
War Comes to the Great Plains



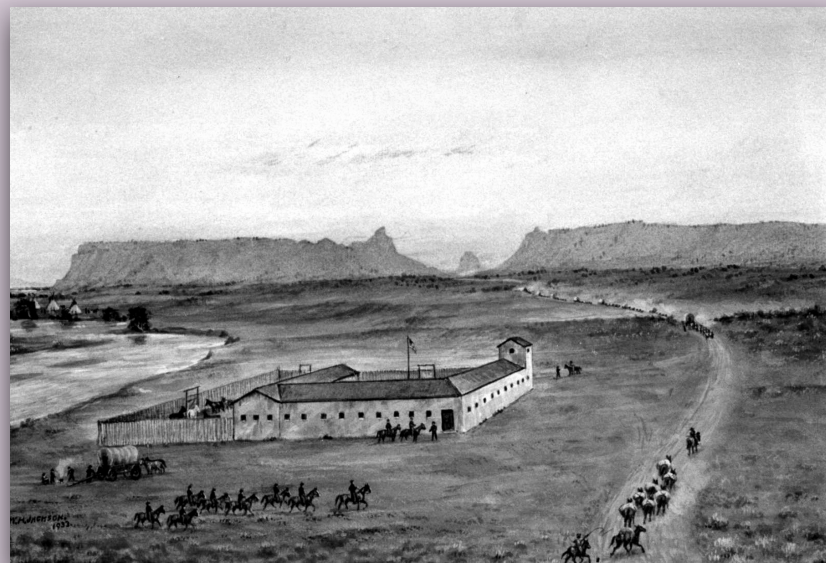
“Cavalry Charge of Sully’s Brigade at the Battle of White Stone Hill, September 3, 1863.” *Harper’s Weekly*, October 31, 1863.

Beginning on August 7-8, 1864, bands of Sioux, Cheyennes, and Arapahos attacked stagecoaches, wagon trains, telegraph stations, and **road ranches** along the overland route from Julesburg, Colorado Territory, eastward for 250 miles through Nebraska's Platte and Little Blue river valleys. More than fifty whites were killed, many stations and road ranches were burned, and a vast amount of property was destroyed. Travel along the overland route by emigrants and freighters virtually ceased. Residents in the Nebraska settlements panicked, and many fled to the towns along the Missouri River.

Accordingly, the First Nebraska Cavalry veterans were recalled from furlough to rendezvous in Omaha, from which they marched to Fort Kearny. At first the regiment lacked horses and equipment. From Fort Kearny, small detachments were deployed to guard road ranches, stagecoach stations, and military subposts scattered along the Platte Valley route. The men escorted the stagecoaches between the posts and protected wagon trains moving along the trail. They had several skirmishes with Indians but no major battles.



Other volunteer troops from Ohio and Iowa, and even former Confederate prisoners of war who had joined the Union army (“**Galvanized Yankees**”), served alongside the Nebraska soldiers. A new military post, Fort Cottonwood, later renamed Fort McPherson, was established southeast of present North Platte in 1863 and elements of the **First Nebraska Veteran Volunteer Cavalry** served there from time to time. A temporary adobe post, Fort Mitchell, was built west of Scotts Bluff in 1864.



This painting by William Henry Jackson shows Fort Mitchell, built in 1864. National Park Service, Scotts Bluff National Monument.

The year 1865 brought the most significant fight with Indians in Civil War Nebraska, although Nebraska troops were not involved. Beginning on February 4, Sioux, Cheyennes, and Arapahos laid siege to the Mud Springs stagecoach and telegraph station in the Nebraska Panhandle. The Indians were soon driven off by Ohio and Iowa cavalymen from Forts Laramie and Mitchell. A few days later the soldiers battled the warriors again at nearby Rush Creek before the Indians moved north across the Platte.

The spring of 1865 saw the buildup for Gen. Patrick Connor’s summer and fall Powder River Expedition from Fort Laramie to punish the tribesmen for attacks on civilians in the Platte Valley and along Wyoming’s Bozeman Trail to the Montana gold mines. The Indians saw the increasing stream of whites as invaders of their homelands and hunting grounds. Both the Pawnee and Omaha Scouts served with the army during this expedition into

today’s Wyoming and Montana. Although the soldiers and scouts fought the Indians several times, the Powder River Expedition failed to deal them a decisive defeat.

Meanwhile, most of the First Nebraska Veteran Volunteer Cavalry remained at small outposts along the Platte River from Fort Kearny to Fort Laramie. They stayed there until the summer of 1866,



This flag of the First Nebraska Veteran Volunteer Cavalry was said to have been made by Nebraska women. NSHS Museum Collections 24272.

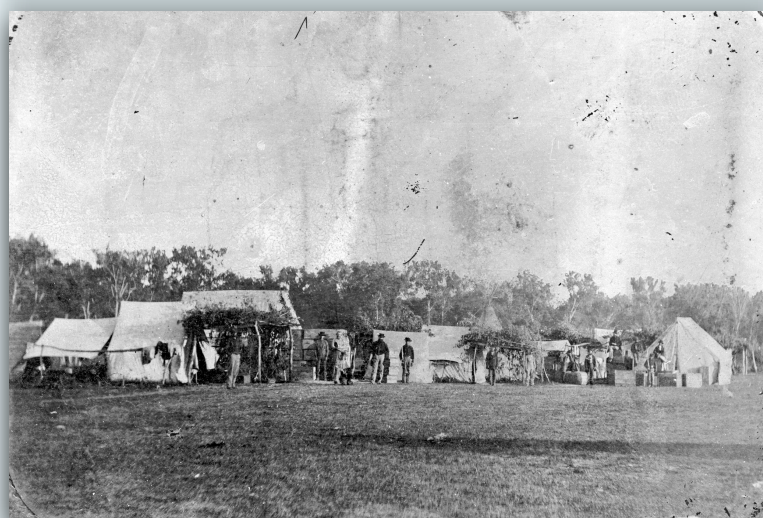
waiting for regular army troops to return to the Plains after the Civil War. During nearly two years of Indian warfare, several Nebraska soldiers were killed or wounded and one man from the First Nebraska, Pvt. Francis W. Lohnes, received the Medal of

Honor for **gallantry** in action. The last of the Nebraska volunteers, the Omaha Scouts, were mustered out of the army on July 16, 1866.

Another Nebraska unit recruited in 1861 served its entire enlistment campaigning against Confederates in the South. Four companies of Nebraska cavalrymen (the “**Nebraska Battalion**”) joined troops from Iowa, Minnesota, and Missouri to form the Curtis Horse, later designated as the Fifth Iowa Volunteer Cavalry. This regiment served with distinction in Missouri, Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia until the war was over.

An August 1862 uprising by Santee Sioux Indians in Minnesota brought the organization of the **Second Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry**, enlisted for nine months. Fearing that the Sioux would attack Nebraska settlements, Governor Alvin Saunders asked the War Department’s permission to raise a regiment for home defense. Gen. John Pope, commander of the Department of the

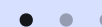
Northwest, authorized the Second Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry and during the winter of 1862-63, companies were enlisted in communities up and down the Missouri River. Col. Robert W. Furnas was commissioned as the regiment’s commander.



Headquarters of the Second Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry at Camp Cook, near Sioux City, 1863. NSHS RG4389-53

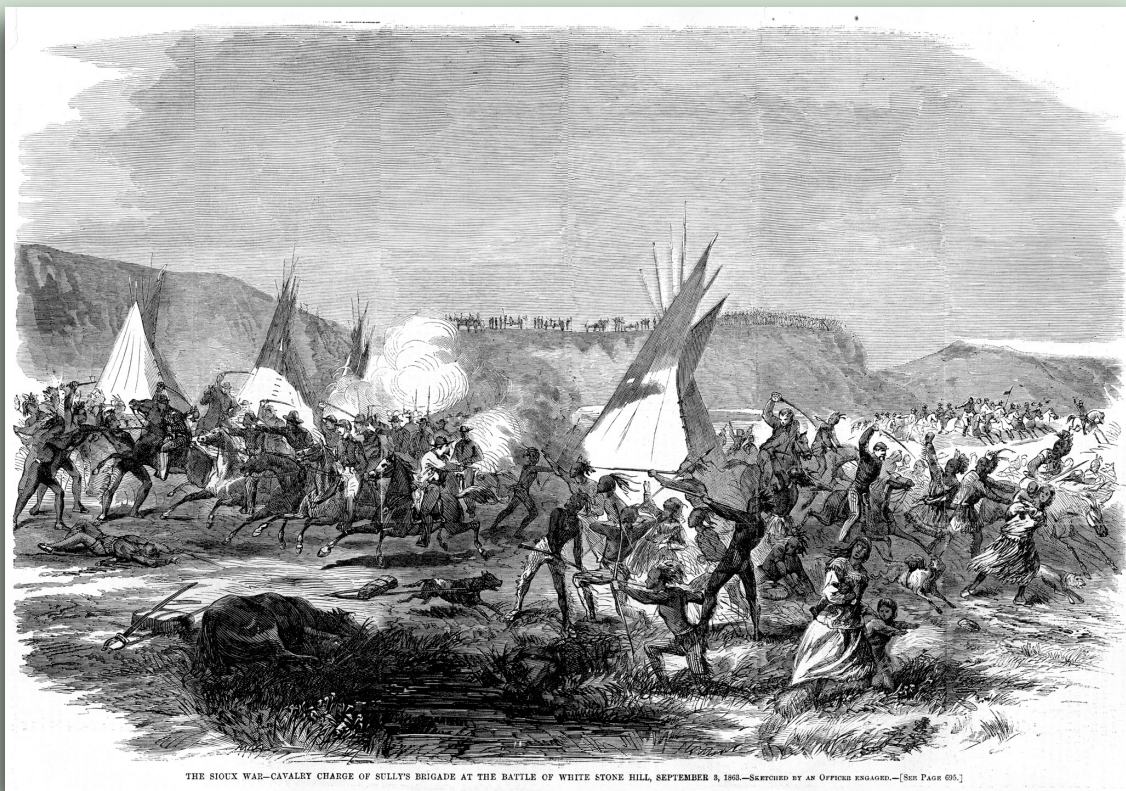


Pvt Jacob Coffman of Falls City enlisted in Company L, Second Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry, in 1863. The Second Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry was organized specifically for home defense, but most of its companies were sent to Dakota Territory to fight Indians. NSHS RG2411-1025



In April 1863, to the dismay of Nebraska's citizens, all but three companies of the Second Nebraska were ordered to join Gen. Alfred Sully's campaign against the Minnesota Sioux, who had fled across the Missouri River into Dakota Territory. After an exhausting summer march up the Missouri from Sioux City, Furnas and the Second Nebraska took part in Sully's September 3, 1863, attack on a large Sioux village at the Battle of White Stone Hill in present North Dakota. The Second Nebraska Volunteers **acquitted** themselves with credit, considering their inexperience and lack of training, and suffered several men killed and wounded. As Furnas noted in his official report, "both officers and men fought with the coolness and courage of veterans . . . not a man flinched a particle."

The Battle of White Stone Hill



THE SIOUX WAR—CAVALRY CHARGE OF SULLY'S BRIGADE AT THE BATTLE OF WHITE STONE HILL, SEPTEMBER 3, 1863.—SKETCHED BY AN OFFICER ENGAGED.—[SEE PAGE 605.]

"Cavalry Charge of Sully's Brigade at the Battle of White Stone Hill, September 3, 1863." Harper's Weekly, October 31, 1863.

Soon after the Battle of White Stone Hill, the Second Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry returned home, where the men were mustered out in the winter of 1863-64. Many soon reenlisted in a home defense force authorized by the governor, called the **First Battalion, Nebraska Veteran Cavalry**. These men, too, were sent to the Platte Valley after the August 1864 Indian raids. In the summer of 1865 the First Battalion was **consolidated** with the First Nebraska Veteran Volunteer Cavalry.



Nancy Jane Fletcher Morton was captured by Indians in early August 1864 when her husband Thomas Morton's wagon train was attacked west of Fort Kearny. She was released a few months later. NSHS RG3310-54

Casualty records for the Nebraska soldiers in the Civil War are incomplete. Frederick H. Dyer's *Compendium of the War of the Rebellion* (Des Moines, 1908) gives 239 Nebraska soldier deaths from all causes, with 35 killed in action or mortally wounded. It does not appear that Dyer included the casualties suffered by the members of the Nebraska Battalion of the Curtis Horse (Fifth Iowa Cavalry). The data assembled by Edgar S. Dudley in *Roster of Nebraska Volunteers* (1888) includes the names of 48 men killed in action or mortally wounded fighting Confederates, guerrillas, or Indians from 1861 until 1866. The same source reveals that 28 soldiers died in accidents of various kinds or from homicides. Because records are sketchy or have been lost, the exact number of Nebraska soldiers who lost their lives during the Civil War years may never be known. By far the greatest number died of disease or other non-combat causes.

CHAPTER 4

Meanwhile, At Home...



Downtown Omaha, about 1865, looking northwest from Thirteenth and Farnam Streets with the territorial capitol building on the horizon. Douglas County Historical Society, Omaha, Nebraska.

A Letter Home

Fort, Henry Feb. 21st 1862

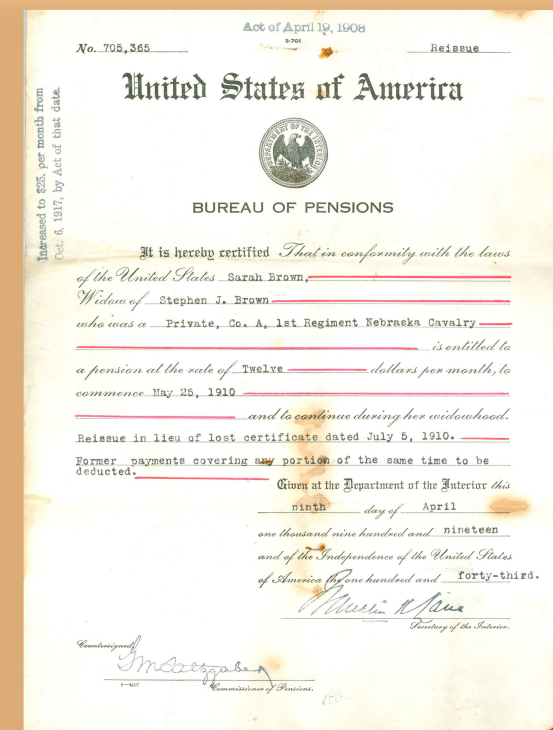
My Dear Parents

As we did not leave here as I thought we would I thought I would write to you again before I left. We left Georgetown on the 3rd and for 5 days we marched through the mud and at night we laid on our tents instead of under them. I was not very well when we left but I had nothing to carry and the march done me good. We got into Jefferson city on Saturday where we took the cars for St. Louis and we got there for the 3rd time on Sunday & we staid there all day and took the boat at night for this place.

First Nebraska private Thomas E. Keen described his experiences during the Battle of Fort Donelson in a letter to his parents. NSHS RG5493

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On the home front, Nebraskans looked for news about their soldiers in dispatches received from the battlefields via the newly completed telegraph lines or in letters the men wrote to the territorial newspapers or to their families. Those left behind suffered many hardships when the soldiers went off to war. The leaving of so many men made it difficult for families to care for their farms and livestock. Many families suffered financially because army pay for privates was only thirteen dollars a month (later raised to sixteen dollars). Several Nebraska officers resigned from the service because their families or businesses needed them at home. **Enlisted men** were not allowed to resign, however and, therefore, many deserted from the army. Those who were killed in battle or died of disease or accidents never returned to their loved ones.



Congress authorized widows of Civil War soldiers to receive pensions based on their deceased husband's Union army service.

The war in Missouri sometimes disrupted steamboat traffic on the Missouri River, creating shortages of supplies of all kinds in Nebraska. Enough crops were raised for food, but the surpluses could not always be shipped to market. By 1863 overland freighting to western army posts and the gold mining regions of Colorado and Montana helped spur the economies of river towns such as Nebraska City and Omaha. Indian attacks in 1864 and 1865 halted freighting along the Platte Valley trail from time to time. Some Nebraskans left the territory to seek their fortunes in the gold mining camps, and refugees from war-torn Missouri fled across the Missouri River to escape the fighting. Men from adjacent states sometimes came to Nebraska to avoid being drafted into the armies.



Freight wagons on the main street of Nebraska City, about 1865.
NSHS RG2294-37

Early in the war, so-called “Jayhawkers” constituted a serious threat, particularly in that part of Nebraska Territory lying across from Missouri. The loyalty of these lawless bands of armed men was often in question. Some claimed to be operating in the interest of the Union against Southern sympathizers, but most were nothing but bandits and horse thieves, robbing homes and threatening citizens. Unionists were victims of the Jayhawkers as well as people said to favor the South.

In many communities the citizens organized anti-Jayhawking leagues and in Nebraska City, it was reported that several Jayhawkers were captured, one of them shot dead, and another thrust beneath the Missouri River ice. Early in 1862 the territorial legislature considered a bill making it lawful to kill any person committing such acts as were charged to Jayhawkers. Although this drastic measure was not passed, Governor Saunders issued a proclamation ordering all Jayhawkers to disband and return to their homes, or leave the territory under threat of severe punishment.

The war’s outbreak seemingly united Nebraskans in support of the Union cause, but **political partisanship** lay just below the surface. Nebraska Democrats generally opposed secession and supported restoration of the Union but they often differed with the Republicans and President Lincoln on how to accomplish it. Administration measures, such as the January 1, 1863, **Emancipation** Proclamation that proclaimed all slaves free in the rebellious states, and the enlistment of black soldiers in the Union army, outraged many Nebraska Democrats who felt the war was justified only to restore the Union. They hoped the fighting might end through compromise that would maintain the rights of states

and their citizens to determine their own policies on questions such as slavery and civil rights.

Leading Nebraska Democrats, such as J. Sterling Morton, attacked the administration with such **vehemence** that they were labeled “Copperheads,” an **epithet** applied to those in the North who were suspected of sympathy for the South or even disloyalty. Their Republican counterparts branded democratic newspapers that criticized the Republicans’ conduct of the war as “secession sheets.” Nebraska citizens who spoke out against administration policies were sometimes arrested and forced to take an oath of allegiance to the Union.

The indirect effects of the Civil War on Nebraska were very important. The war slowed immigration and settlement, deferred federal funding for internal improvements such as roads and bridges, and delayed progress toward statehood. When Congress



Leading Democrats, such as J. Sterling Morton, attacked the administration with such vehemence that they were labeled “Copperheads.” Morton is best remembered as the founder of Arbor Day.
NSHS RG 1013-8

levied a war tax on Northern states and territories, Nebraska’s treasury was empty. Samuel G. Daily, Nebraska’s delegate in Washington, D.C., convinced Congress to withhold its annual \$20,000 **appropriation** for expenses of the territorial legislature in lieu of requiring the territory to pay the more than \$19,000 war tax. As a result, the Nebraska legislature did not meet in 1863.



The Daily Herald Building in Omaha. Newspaper editors had strong opinions about politics and the war. Often, editors from different political parties argued with each other in print.
NSHS RG2341-195

Before the war, sectional controversies in Congress had **stalemated** the selection of a route for a transcontinental railroad. The secession of the Southern states, however, enabled passage of an act chartering the railroad in 1862. The next year President Lincoln selected a central route through Nebraska’s Platte Valley, with Council Bluffs, Iowa, across from Omaha, as its eastern terminus.

Building the transcontinental railroad across Nebraska, and its completion to the West Coast by 1869, was immensely important to the state's future development. Other railroads soon followed, making settlement possible in areas distant from the Missouri River.

The Homestead Act signed by President Lincoln on May 20, 1862, was also of major significance to Nebraska's future. The act allowed persons twenty-one years of age or the head of a household, who were citizens or who had declared their intention to become citizens, and who had never borne arms against the United States, to claim up to 160 acres of public land. After paying a small filing fee and living on and cultivating the land for five years, the homesteader could receive title to the land from the government.

Although the Homestead Act took effect on January 1, 1863, initial settlement under its provisions was slow while the Civil War still raged. After the war, and with an amendment to allow Union veterans to deduct their time of military service from the five-year residency requirement, the Homestead Act attracted many former Union soldiers to settle in Nebraska.

The Civil War and its aftermath also played an important part in Nebraska Territory's transition to statehood in 1867. Adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865 abolished slavery in the United States. Subsequent amendments aimed to grant former slaves equal protection under the laws, citizenship, and voting rights. When Nebraska voters in 1866 approved a state constitution that limited voting to white men only, Congress refused to approve Nebraska's admission to the

Union unless the "whites only" restriction was removed. Congress thus established a precedent for the future readmission to the Union of the former Confederate states. Henceforth, Congress and not the states would control **suffrage** and other **civil rights**. The Nebraska legislature agreed to Congress's "fundamental condition," and President Andrew Johnson signed the Nebraska statehood proclamation on March 1, 1867.



The Great Seal of the state of Nebraska, with its Equality before the Law motto, adopted in June 1867. This painted glass seal once formed part of the skylight ceiling in the House chamber at the U.S. Capitol building. NSHS Museum Collections 7434-2.

Because the Democratic Party had earned a reputation as the party of secession (most of the rebel states had been heavily Democratic), and because many Nebraska Democrats had opposed Republican war policies, the Union victory relegated the Democrats to a minority in the state. Helped by the large influx of Union army veterans after statehood, the Republicans dominated Nebraska politics for decades, controlling the legislature and winning the governorship and most seats in Congress until the 1890s. Many of Nebraska's early state leaders had served in the Union army and many of the counties formed in the early statehood years were named for Union generals or Republican politicians.

While Nebraska was distant from the major battlefields and furnished only a few soldiers, the Civil War was a **watershed event** with major consequences for Nebraska's social, political, and economic development, then and in the future. The years from the beginning of the Civil War in 1861 to statehood for Nebraska in 1867 deserve to be remembered and understood as an important and fascinating chapter in the history of the territory and the state.

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Acquitted

To perform one’s duty or assignment.

Related Glossary Terms

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Chapter 3 - War Comes to the Great Plains

Appropriation

A sum of money set aside by a legislative body to carry out a government program or project.

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Chapter 4 - Meanwhile, At Home...

Bounty

A payment by the federal, state, or local government to induce men to enlist in the army.

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Chapter 2 - Nebraska’s Soldiers in Union Blue

Civil rights

Rights guaranteed to an individual by the U.S. Constitution or by law, such as the right to vote, exemption from involuntary servitude (slavery) equal protection of the law, due process of law, etc.

Related Glossary Terms

Suffrage

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Chapter 4 - Meanwhile, At Home...

Compendium

A volume containing summaries or statistical data relating to a particular topic.

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Chapter 3 - War Comes to the Great Plains

Consolidated

In military terms, combining two or more weak units into a single, stronger one.

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Chapter 3 - War Comes to the Great Plains

Emancipate

To set free from servitude or bondage, as in slavery.

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Chapter 4 - Meanwhile, At Home...

Enlisted men

Soldiers who are not issued a “commission,” which is a document conferring rank as an officer. Enlisted men were essentially privates.

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Chapter 4 - Meanwhile, At Home...

Epithet

A label; a characterizing word or phrase.

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Chapter 4 - Meanwhile, At Home...

First Battalion, Nebraska Veteran Cavalry

(1864-65) - Four companies of volunteer soldiers authorized by the governor of Nebraska for service within Nebraska Territory. Many of the men had previously been soldiers in the Second Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry. The reenlistment of former soldiers in the First Battalion authorized its designation as a “veteran” unit.

Related Glossary Terms

Veteran

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Chapter 3 - War Comes to the Great Plains

First Nebraska Veteran Volunteer Cavalry

(1863-66) - The new name of the former First Nebraska Volunteer Infantry after it was converted into a cavalry regiment in the fall of 1863. Many soldiers who had served in the infantry regiment reenlisted for a second, three-year term. That entitled the cavalry regiment to designation as a “veteran” regiment. It served in Missouri and Arkansas in 1863-64 and in Nebraska Territory from August 1864 to July 1866.

Related Glossary Terms

First Nebraska Volunteer Infantry, Veteran

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Chapter 3 - War Comes to the Great Plains

First Nebraska Volunteer Infantry

(1861-63) - The regiment (approximately 1,000 officers and men when organized) that joined the Union army in 1861 and served in Missouri, Tennessee, and Arkansas until it was converted to cavalry and became known as the First Nebraska Veteran Volunteer Cavalry.

Related Glossary Terms

First Nebraska Veteran Volunteer Cavalry

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Chapter 2 - Nebraska’s Soldiers in Union Blue

Furlough

A temporary leave of absence from military service.

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Chapter 2 - Nebraska’s Soldiers in Union Blue

Gallantry

Bravery or fortitude, especially marked by heroic acts.

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Chapter 3 - War Comes to the Great Plains

Galvanized Yankees

A nickname applied to former Confederate soldiers released from Northern prisoner-of-war camps when they agreed to join the Union army to fight Indians in the West. “Galvanize” means to stimulate or provide an incentive; “Yankee” is a nickname for Union soldiers derived from their residence in the Northern states. The promise of freedom from prison “galvanized” the former Southern soldiers to become temporary “Yankees.”

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Chapter 3 - War Comes to the Great Plains

Guerrilla forces

Small, mobile groups of irregular soldiers or armed civilians who use hit and run tactics instead of regular warfare to harass the enemy by destroying supplies, disrupting communications, and killing members of the opposing forces.

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Chapter 2 - Nebraska’s Soldiers in Union Blue

Kansas-Nebraska Act

The May 30, 1854 act of Congress that created the territories of Nebraska and Kansas.

Related Glossary Terms

Missouri Compromise of 1820, Popular sovereignty

Index

Chapter 1 - The Law That Tore the Country Apart

Missouri Compromise of 1820

An act of Congress that brought Missouri into the Union as a slave state and Maine as a free state (without slavery.) The compromise also banned slavery “forever” in the remaining lands originally acquired through the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, which included the future territories of Nebraska and Kansas.

Related Glossary Terms

Kansas-Nebraska Act

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Chapter 1 - The Law That Tore the Country Apart

Mustered-in

The formal assignment of a soldier to a military unit, contrasted with enlistment, a commitment to enter military service for a specified period of time.

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Chapter 2 - Nebraska’s Soldiers in Union Blue

Nebraska Battalion

The nickname for four companies of Nebraska soldiers who enlisted in 1861 as cavalrymen, and were then absorbed into the Fifth Iowa Volunteer Cavalry, which served in Missouri, Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia.

Related Glossary Terms

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Chapter 3 - War Comes to the Great Plains

Nebraska Militia

All able-bodied Nebraska men between age 18 and 45 constituted the unorganized militia. Military companies formed in towns or counties in Nebraska Territory constituted the organized militia and some of them joined the First Nebraska Regiment in 1861. Companies that remained at home, as well as the unorganized militia, remained subject to the control of the governor of Nebraska Territory.

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Chapter 2 - Nebraska’s Soldiers in Union Blue

Political partisanship

A strong and sometimes unreasonable attachment to a single political party. Political partisanship in a government can make it hard for things to get done if it causes lawmakers from different parties to be unwilling to compromise with each other.

Related Glossary Terms

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Chapter 4 - Meanwhile, At Home...

Popular sovereignty

In the broad sense, meaning the right of the people to make decisions (local control.) As applied by the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the residents of the two territories were authorized to decide for themselves whether or not to allow slavery there.

Related Glossary Terms

Kansas-Nebraska Act

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Chapter 1 - The Law That Tore the Country Apart

Precedent

A decision or act that serves as an example or justification for a subsequent one.

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Chapter 1 - The Law That Tore the Country Apart

Regular U.S. Army soldiers

Soldiers of the permanent, peacetime army, contrasted with volunteer soldiers who enter military service when called for by the government during a specific emergency, such as the Civil War.

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Repulse

To force or beat back.

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Chapter 2 - Nebraska’s Soldiers in Union Blue

Road ranche

A private commercial establishment located along a trail that offered supplies, lodging, and repair services to travelers, but was not primarily engaged in raising livestock.

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Seceded / Secession

Withdrew from a group or organization, in this case, the withdrawal of states in the American South from the federal union, the United States of America.

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Chapter 1 - The Law That Tore the Country Apart

Second Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry

(1862-63) - A regiment enlisted for nine months and originally expected to remain in Nebraska Territory for home defense. In 1863 most of the regiment was ordered to join a military campaign against Indians in Dakota Territory, but three companies were left behind in Nebraska.

Related Glossary Terms

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Chapter 3 - War Comes to the Great Plains

Sentiment

An attitude towards something; a mental feeling or emotion.

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Chapter 1 - The Law That Tore the Country Apart

Skirmish

A brief fight or encounter between small groups of soldiers or between soldiers and Indians or guerrillas.

Related Glossary Terms

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Stalemated

Deadlocked, brought to a standstill.

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Chapter 4 - Meanwhile, At Home...

Suffrage

The right to vote, especially in local, state, and national elections.

Related Glossary Terms

Civil rights

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Chapter 4 - Meanwhile, At Home...

Vehemence

Strength and passion of opinion or emotion.

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Chapter 4 - Meanwhile, At Home...

Veteran

A person who has served in a country’s armed forces. During the Civil War, soldiers who reenlisted for a second term were known as “veteran volunteers.”

Related Glossary Terms

First Battalion, Nebraska Veteran Cavalry, First Nebraska Veteran Volunteer Cavalry

Watershed event

An event or development representing a turning point in history.

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Chapter 4 - Meanwhile, At Home...

Wharves

Docks for ships or steamboats.

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